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Binary Oppositions in R.S. Thomas'
H'm (١٩٧٢), *Young and Old* (١٩٧٢) and *What is a*
Welshman (١٩٧٤)

An MA Thesis

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Introduction

This study examines the dualistic tendency in the poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas or R.S. Thomas. Thomas is a poet and a priest, Welsh and English; in the sense of showing a strong belonging to his Welsh fellowmen, but at the same time he is against their submissiveness to the English hegemony. Thomas' representation of these tensions and the creative energy resulting from the tension of opposition is the ground upon which this study stands.

R. S. Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913. He was the only child of a sea captain. In 1918 his family moved to Holyhead. It was in the year 1932 when he started studying at the University College of North Wales, at the time he read classics. In 1936, he was ordained as a priest. Till year 1940 Thomas was a rector in Manafon, a Welsh speaking rural area, where he started to study the Welsh language and it was also in Manafon that he started to publish his first collections of poetry. (Rogers 9)

The dualities of R.S. Thomas' poetry are explored in three collections published in the seventies, namely: *H'm* (1972), *Young and Old* (1972) and *What is a Welshman* (1974). These three collections are the acute representatives of the transitional period in Thomas' poetic career. They combine features from his early and late poetry alike and carry Thomas' main oppositions.

The study falls into three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter seeks to define 'binarism' as a critical term. It offers an overview of the theory of binary oppositions. The second chapter tackles the contraries between the Welsh and the English identities and cultures. The third and last chapter identifies other oppositions in Thomas' poetry; mainly the presence/ absence opposition with its variations. According to Structuralism and modern literary criticism the main and most important opposition is between presence and absence of an object or being. Akin to the presence-absence opposition is the antithesis of silence and speech

which would be discussed within the framework of the larger scope of the presence-absence opposition.

Chapter One: The focus falls on the theory of binarism and how it is employed as a critical strategy in literary texts. Binary oppositions in critical theory can be defined as any pair of opposites. The study traces the idea of opposition through its different faces chronologically from the old to the modern. Chapter one starts with the philosophy of Hegel and his opposed terms of thesis and antithesis, passes through Coleridge, Levi Strauss, Jacques Derrida and it finally tackles the New Criticism figures in whose work 'opposition' plays a major role.

Hegel's philosophy mostly lends itself to tension. His dialectics could be deemed as his chief contribution to the Western thought at the time. Hegel's idea of opposition and tension is crystallized in his terms: 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis'. Another form of tension in Hegel's philosophy is portrayed in the dichotomy between what he calls 'objective spirit' and 'subjective spirit'.

Coleridge's Biographia Literaria bears within its pages a lot about oppositions. He points out eleven pairs of opposites that could be reconciled through imagination. Later in the Biographia, Coleridge presents 'fancy' and 'imagination' as opposing terms. He further adds that 'imagination' in itself includes another tension resulting from its opposing components of 'primary imagination' and 'secondary imagination'.

Opposition has also been an important term in Structuralism, later developed by prominent Twentieth century intellectuals like Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida who draw on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories. Levi Strauss is most well-known for his structural analysis of mythology. He is concerned with pointing out the reasons for the evolvment of myths, that share similarities and underlying patterns though they belong to different cultures. He answers this question not by citing the contents of myths, but rather by showing how they share similar structures. He holds that there is a tension, or rather a structural binary opposition, in myths. According to Levi-Strauss, this is the significance of the myth: it presents certain structural relations, in the

form of binary oppositions which are common to all cultures. Levi-Strauss asserts that every culture organizes knowledge into binary opposite pairs, and that these oppositions have to be reconciled logically.

Jacques Derrida is an intellectual who holds the view that through binary oppositions any text can be read and analyzed. He claims that through opposite pairs, texts operate themselves in powerful and persuasive ways. Likewise, words acquire their meanings through opposition to other words. Therefore, the other in this case represents what the self is not, and the self tends to conceive itself through the image of the other, the same applied to the meanings of words. Jacques Derrida observes that the system of binary oppositions governs Western philosophy as a whole. (Eagleton ۱۳۳)

The chapter moves forward to shed light on different names of one concept that is tension and opposition. Allen Tate calls it tension. The chapter will tackle his seminal essay "Tension in Poetry" in which Tate gives examples of great poetry that manages to achieve tension. Tate's major contribution in this essay is that he attempts to prove the link between immensity of poetry and tension. In so doing, some samples of poems presented by Tate are to be examined.

Robert Penn Warren's "Pure and Impure Poetry" is also another essay in which tension or opposition is considered a chief requirement of presenting good art. Warren's notion of 'impure poetry' and the difference between its opposed term 'pure poetry' is to be discussed within the framework of oppositions, in addition to samples of poetry selected by Warren to mark the dichotomy between 'pure' and 'impure' poetry. Moreover, the chapter would lend particular attention to William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity. Specifically the focus would be on Empson's seventh type that is tension. Finally, Cleanth Brooks' 'Paradox' that is also pointing to opposition and tension is to be examined together with Brooks' examples selected from different poets.

Chapter Two: Lends particular attention to the first opposition in R.S. Thomas' poetry that is Welsh/ English. The Welsh landscape is represented as opposed to the English. Thomas displays such opposition

as if it were a confrontation between Wales and London. In addition, the chapter also examines the opposition between the Welsh and the English identities and culture. Thomas has always been firmly convinced that the English ruined the Welsh culture. Although he started to learn the Welsh language at the age of thirty, Thomas, like most Anglo-Welsh writers considered Wales, rather than London, the centre to which he always returns. Poem after poem Thomas was much preoccupied with preserving the Welsh identity and culture from any outside interference, especially that of England. In so doing, he sometimes becomes harsh on his fellow man. In Thomas' "This One" from his 1952 collection *H'm*, he describes the poor farmer as

Ploughing under the tall boughs
Of the tree of the knowledge of
Good and Evil, **watching its fruit**
Ripen, abstaining from it.

(Collected Poems 110)

Chapter Three: Sheds light on other interrelated oppositions in Thomas' poetry. This chapter is to be mainly concerned with Thomas' 1952 collection *H'm* where the oppositions of presence/ absence, silence/ speech and matter/ spirit are concentrated. The chapter seeks to display the interrelation between the three pairs of opposites as well as their representation in Thomas' poetry.

In modern literary criticism, the main and most important opposition is between presence and absence of an object or being. Akin to the presence-absence opposition is the antithesis of silence and speech which would be discussed within the framework of the larger scope of the presence-absence opposition. One manifestation of this duality has to do with Thomas' anxiety about the 'inner' and 'outer' dialogues. The inner dialogue is that he employs when addressing the Divine, and the outer one is that of addressing his fellow men. The matter/ spirit opposition is also identified. Thomas' verse that deals with the hegemony of the machinery would be highlighted. In Thomas poetry the machine is opposed to spirit as well as to his sense of Nature. However, Thomas'

response to nature is described as "realistic and disenchanted" (Underhill 82). Poem after poem the machine is represented as a great threat to the Welsh genuine identity. In some poems, however, "the Welsh landscape is replaced by an almost allegorical landscape" (Jones and Schmidt 260). In his 1942 collection *H'm*, Thomas demonstrates the acute influence of modern technology and machinery on the spirit.

In a nutshell, Thomas' poetry can be viewed as "an ongoing excavation of that tension of 'inbetweenness', most often not as a reaching after resolution but as an embracing...of the frequently dire tensions of a divided identity..." (Morgan 4).

Chapter One

Binarism in its Different Guises

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If many critics argue that great art grows out of tension, thus tension is the underlying element of what can be identified as great art. Tension grows out of the idea of opposition which has been illustrated by so many men of letters and intellectuals since the olden ages. However, the idea of opposition is as old as man starting with the opposition between Adam and Eve, continues in the opposition between Abel and Cane. Various issues could be looked upon through the looking glasses of polarized thinking. In sociology, man and woman are two opposed poles. In psychology, there is the 'self' as opposed to the 'other'. In science, there are the two poles of positive and negative, and many other examples. Tension, as a concept, or rather opposition varies in its shapes, forms and even terms from one intellectual to another, yet all in the framework of having two opposed sides or meanings. In The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, tension is defined as a term that refers to "elements of opposition, resistance, strain, and antinomy that may appear in a poem" (Princeton ۱۲۶۹). Historically, the idea of opposition or tension played a major role in a whole system of thought in different fields like art, science, history and religion.

It could be claimed that the term 'tension' started to be theorized by Aristotle, passed through Hegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, till it took its final shape of 'Binary Oppositions' with Claude Levi Strauss' Structural Anthropology and Derrida's Deconstruction. New criticism has also a role in theorizing for the idea of tension and opposition through its famous literary critics like Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson and Cleanth Brooks.

The figures to be examined are Friedrich Hegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Claude Levi Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson and Cleanth Brooks respectively. The reason behind choosing these names stems from the fact that they all share a tendency to emphasize dualism in art. Thus different versions of tension evolve from their thought systems and critical approaches. Binarism therefore takes different names in each one's theorizing. Hegel's dialectics

are the main source of tension in his philosophy. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* bears within itself his own definitions and dichotomies drawn between pairs of opposites. Both Levi Strauss and Derrida share the view that oppositions could underlie any text. Finally, in the School of New Criticism tension or rather opposition takes various shapes with its representatives. Allen Tate's famous article entitled "Tension in Poetry" best illustrates his views on tension and its necessary presence in a good work of art. Robert Penn Warren's "impure poetry" refers to that which includes tension, while Empson's "seventh type of ambiguity" is another investigation of tension and so is Cleanth Brook's "paradox".

Friedrich Hegel

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is one of the founders of a philosophical tradition in the history of Western philosophy, in addition to his tremendous contribution to German idealist philosophy. In Hegel's philosophy, tension is demonstrated in various ways. Hegel made use of the conventional definition of dialectics in the classical philosophy which proposes that in any situation there is a proposition or an argument, a counter argument, and the outcome of them may be a reconciliation. Hegel attempted to finalize his own version of dialectics in which he argues that the whole system of dialectics is governed by the tension produced out of the opposition between the argument or 'thesis' and the counter argument or the 'antithesis'. The tension that is created out of them is to be resolved when both of them reconcile to form the 'synthesis'. Tension for Hegel is inherent in things and each stage of the three stages; thesis, antithesis or synthesis, has its own internal tension which leads to the next. He further asserts that the real purpose of the system of dialectics is "to study things in their own being and movement and thus to demonstrate the finitude of the partial categories of understanding" (Hegel 1991). In other words, Hegel believes that the system of dialectics is important for its ability to guide minds in order to see things as they are and to reveal the finite state of the processes of understanding.

Hegel argues in his dialectics that it is important to deconstruct the opposition between concepts. He divides the dialectic thought into three stages, which are: the stage of understanding, the stage of the dialectical or negative reason and the stage of positive reason. In the first stage the mind tends to have certain thoughts about things as being 'finite'. The second stage is described by Hegel as "the inherent self – sublation of these finite determinations and their transition into their opposites". Hegel then asserts that the results of the dialectic stage are not always negative as they might lead to some positive results in the final stage of the positive reason which "apprehends the unity of the determinations in their opposition – the affirmation, which is embodied in their dissolution and their transition." Hegel views this "conceptual transformation" as highly important as without it will be rather difficult to grasp or to understand the world without "apparent incoherence" as Robert Stern puts it in his Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit (16).

Apart from Hegel's dialectics and his demarcation of the thesis, antithesis and synthesis, there is another differentiation between his notion of the 'objective' spirit and the 'subjective' spirit as opposed to it, which results in another version of tension. By the 'objective' spirit Hegel means what he portrays in his "The Philosophy of Right" as being the whole of the "ethical institutions" which have the right of forming and reforming one's ethical and moral norms. These institutions include the state, the family and the society in general. On the other hand, the 'subjective' spirit is what Hegel calls on all that he discusses in different fields like psychology and anthropology.

In Freedom and Tradition in Hegel: Reconsidering Anthropology, Ethics and Religion, Thomas A. Lewis points out that the tension resulted from the opposition between the objective spirit and the subjective spirit is nothing but the outcome of the tension between "the inherent egalitarianism of subjective spirit and the structures of differentiation or articulation that Hegel took to be necessary within a developed state" (18).

A perpetual tension goes through Hegel's philosophy, especially the uncommon mode of tension in his discussion about the "end of history" and the "conclusion" the spirit is supposed to reach in achieving absolute knowledge. Tension here lies in the fact that there is no

consensus on what Hegel means by the "end of history" and the "conclusion". Critics and analysts face a handful of interpretations as to the following: whether Hegel means by the "end of history" and the "conclusion" a real and an absolute end that is not open to further progress, or he means an epochal end that would allow versions of development and progress in history. The resulted ambiguity of Hegel's notions of the "end of history" and the "conclusion" is a major source of tension (Berthold - Bond ١١٥).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

S. T. Coleridge's Biographia Literaria is deemed as an outstanding critical work of its time. This critical study includes versions of opposition and tension. Throughout his constant endeavours as a literary critic, Coleridge has always been fond of oppositions and the resulted tension as a natural outcome of them. In one of his most important passages from the Biographia Literaria he points out how notions or items can be opposed and reconciled:

Imagination...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and of freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self – possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial; still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (Coleridge ١٥٠)

Coleridge portrays a line of oppositions, he argues that imagination has the power of reconciling his famous eleven pairs of opposites, and consequently imagination harmonizes sameness with difference, general with concrete, idea with image, representative with individual, familiarity with novelty, order with emotion, judgment with enthusiasm and finally artificial with natural (Brooks and Wimsatt ٣٩٦).

Reconciliation in itself is an important concept in the Biographia. It is the tool whereby Coleridge reflects on his opposites. A conscious reader of Coleridge's chapter eighteen in the Biographia can easily deduce that both 'sameness' and 'difference' reconcile in the form of what he calls 'imitation'. Imitation, however, is "opposed to copying" (Coleridge 181).

Another form of tension displays itself through the opposition between Coleridge's famous notions of 'Fancy' and 'Imagination'. According to him, mind is divided into two faculties, which are: fancy and imagination. Imagination includes in itself two other opposites since it is divided into two distinct types that are primary imagination and secondary imagination.

Fancy, for Coleridge, is thought to be inferior to imagination as it works through a passive and a mechanical conscious mind. Fancy, then, does not have a lot to do or to provide since it is only responsible for receiving data, storing and recalling it in the mind, and thus it could be labeled as an empirical faculty that has nothing to do with the super powers of a genius mind.

Imagination, on the contrary, has more advanced powers. The polarities of tension in imagination fall into two types. The first one is the primary imagination which Coleridge sees as the major faculty of man's perception. In other words, it is the media through which one tends to perceive the world, so it is more or less associated with senses. Coleridge sees the primary imagination as the "necessary imagination" which "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses" (Coleridge 182). The secondary imagination as opposed to the primary one is what Coleridge associates with the powers of the genius mind and its insight. This type of imagination, however, can achieve the operations of the primary imagination but in a much more intense and idealized manner, which qualifies it to be connected to noble and genuine art of great artists, especially poets.

Akin to the formal distinction between fancy and imagination and that between primary and secondary imagination, is another level of tension that is reflected in chapter thirteen where Coleridge maintains that

some metaphors can produce tension through the opposition they represent between "the character and the works of fanatics" as opposed to "imaginative people and imaginative work". He early defines what he means by "fanaticism" in chapter two pointing out that "fanaticism is derived from the swarming of bees...the passion being in an inverse proportion to the insight, that the more vivid, as this the less distinct; anger is the inevitable consequence" (Coleridge 14). Thus, fanaticism is for him the direct opposite of insight which is more concerned with abstract concepts rather than vivid visions.

Other levels of tension in Coleridge's Biographia can vividly manifest themselves through his representation of the oppositions between "true poets" and "false poets", "anonymous critics" and "philosophic critics" and between true philosophers and false philosophers. He further draws a contrast between his own type of education that produced a philosophic critic to that which "anonymous" critics got. Afterwards, Coleridge starts to meditate on the opposition between great poetry and what he calls 'modern trash', the same applies to the opposition between anonymous criticism and great criticism (Allen and Unwin 4). He also holds that great poets should be able to blend and unify both imagination and fallacy in a balanced way in order to produce great art.

Levi Strauss⁽¹⁾

In his "Structuralism and Ecology" Levi Strauss declares that "even the process of visual perception makes use of binary oppositions" (134). Strauss' thought concerning the oppositions lends itself back to Hegel's most famous notions of "thesis, antithesis and synthesis" which denote that in any situation there are two opposing sides in addition to their resolution.

Strauss' theory almost started with his work in South America whereby he was able to demonstrate that in the Amazon rain forest culture there are "dual organizations", which are the representatives of two opposites and their resolution, or in Hegel's terms 'synthesis'. In the Amazon rain forest the village is divided into two halves, which represent the two opposites 'thesis and antithesis', nevertheless, people from the two